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MALTESE MEMORIES

"TIFKIRIET"

by

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VI

THE OLD THINGS

"Little or no distinction can be drawn between classic Myth and popular Fairy-tale: Myth was obviously once Fairy-tale, and what is often supposed to be mere Fairy-tale proves in many instances to be unsuspected Theology."—HAROLD BAYLEY, *The Lost Language of Symbolism.*

". . . But what made the People of the Hills go away?" Una asked. "Different things . . ." said Puck. "Most of them were foreigners who couldn't stand our climate. The fact is they began as Gods. The Phoenicians brought some . . . and the Gauls and the Jutes and the Danes and the Frisians and the Angles."[1]

It was not quite fair of Puck to talk of the Old Things as "foreigners." They have no nation. They belong to all nations. Puck himself is the "Mikum-Wess" of the American Indians, Pan of the Greeks, Krishna of the Hindus. The stories that men tell of him, the clothes he wears, the language he talks, may differ, but he is still Puck. He only seems a native.

As with comparative religion, so is it with folklore. All returns, full circle, to a point where pagan faiths, myths, customs, are rooted in some Age of Beginnings when Man was a frightened, groping child.

"After a while men simply left the Old Things alone . . ." Puck goes on. "The roofs of their temples fell in, and the Old Things had to scuttle out and pick up a living as they could."[2] Malta had been Christian and the Temple of Bel a waste of stones for centuries when Weland still held sway in England. It seems, therefore, the more surprising that traces of the "Old Things" remain in islands so anciently and

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[1] *Puck of Pook's Hill.* [2] *Puck of Pook's Hill*

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178 so fervently Christian. The reason lies, perhaps, in their
795 Catholicism. The Faith has a tolerant and not unfriendly eye for many of the Old Things. It is hard to think of St. Francis being unkind to a leprechaun.

The savants make much argument about Malta's folklore. The wish being often father to their able reasoning, they will prove from it that the Maltese are Phoenician or Arab or Italian with equal conviction. Like the Cornishman who will tell you that the Hobby Horse was invented to frighten away the French, the people themselves know little if anything of the reasons why certain tales are told, certain things done; but, from birth to grave, the Old Things—often recognisable, but always with their peculiar Maltese twist—make intermittent appearances in the lives of Zeppu[1] and Grez.[1]

Some of them even have so far won the good opinion of Mother Church as to be granted a place in her own ceremonies.

ON GETTING BORN

844 The Maltese baby—boy or girl—gets born with very little
824 fuss, and is always welcome. In Gozo, or in what remains of country, some friend of the mother will assist the arrival of the little one, bringing into the house with her the withered bud of a certain rose. The flower is placed in water and slowly opens. At the moment of its fullest opening the child is born.
844 Here is clearly a very ancient magic. The association of the
824 rose with Motherhood, with Life, and indeed with Godhead
171 itself, is as old as time. In the Litany of Loretto, the Virgin Mother is invoked as "Rosa Mystica"—"Mystical Rose." Dante saw the innermost circle of the heavenly spheres as a rose. The Brahmins, the Persians, and the Jews all attached
844 a high mystic symbolism to the rose. The simple peasant,
824 setting her rosebud in water, little knows what forgotten gods

[1] Popular personifications of the peasant and his wife.

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she honours and calls upon in her sister's hour of need. The tale is told of the birth-rose which was forgotten. Triplets were born. Later the rose was found, having grown on its withered stem three healthy branches bearing fresh, green leaves. Whatever deep significance attached originally to the birth-rose, the custom has a beauty of its own.

The next thought is for the little one's future. A gold ring or some other golden object is placed in the water in which he or she is washed, in order, they say, that riches will not be lacking. At one time, it may be, something of more value than the dross of riches was sought, for gold was the symbol of wisdom and a bright understanding long before it had value as currency.

It will be well if the baby is not red-headed, for the red-headed child will inevitably be known as "Son of the Wind," "Daughter of the alcove," or even more scurrilously, "Child of the priest." This readiness to doubt the paternity of poor little "Copper-knob" seems to indicate that, in spite of the blue or grey eyes of the peasants, the Maltese have always been an essentially brunette people. The slur may be no older than the occupation of the priestly knights, when celibacy must frequently have proved too much for the young "Aryans" of the Teutonic Langues. It may date back to the much earlier time of red-bearded Ullyses. It may, again, be nothing more than a rendering of "love-child"—for red has always been the colour of Love—sacred to Astoreth, Isis, and Venus.

Yet another of the Old Things has a hand in birth. Even to-day it is accounted by some a serious matter for a child to be born on Christmas Eve. Such a child is in danger of becoming a *Gaugau*—one whose spirit will leave its body every Christmas Eve—"They then go out and wander all over the island frightening people with their groanings. After thus performing these ghostly pranks for some hours,

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these transformed creatures return home towards dawn quite exhausted and awake in the morning quite unconscious of their nocturnal expedition."[1] The derivation of the word *Gaugau* has been given as the Syrian *Hagogo*, a ghost; but surely the *Gaugau* is more than a simple ghost. His behaviour stamps him as a vampire. Busuttil says that "the yearly punishment" is thought to be inflicted because Christ "does not like anyone to be born at the same time he was born," and then suggests that the *Gaugau* came into Malta with the Phoenicians. The Phoenician origin and the popular explanation seem quite irreconcilable until it is recalled that—

> "It is well known that in the transition from paganry to Christianity the Christian clergy, finding it impossible to wean the populace from old customs or to eradicate primitive beliefs, discreetly met the situation by diverting pagan festivals to the honour of Christ. It is not so generally known that December 25th, the Christmas Day of Christendom, was necessarily thus fixed for the reason that this date was the birthday of Mithra, and that the obdurate heathen flatly refused to relinquish their cherished festival. It was not until A.D. 400 that the Church Fathers accepted the inevitable, and tactfully adopted the Birthday of Mithra as the official Birthday of Christianity. At the beginning of the fifth century, S. Chrysostom, referring to the festival of the pagan Sun god, wrote: 'On this day also the birthday of Christ *was lately fixed* at Rome in order that, while the heathens were busy with their profane ceremonies, the Christians might perform their sacred rites undisturbed. They call this (December 25th) the birthday of the Invincible One (Mithra); but who is so invincible as the Lord? They call

[1] BUSUTTIL, *Holiday Customs in Malta*.

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it the Birthday of the Solar Disc; but Christ is the Sun of Righteousness' " (S. HEATH, *Romance of Symbolism*).[1]

We cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, connect the vampire *Gaugau* with Christianity; but with Mithra the affair becomes quite different. It is not difficult to connect a child born on the eve of the Birth-feast of the bloodthirsty Mithra with something more terrible than "ghostly pranks." It is comforting to hear that the vampire *Gaugau* is now capable of nothing worse than "frightening people with his groanings!"

There was a time before the dread broom of "Progress" began to sweep all peasant customs—good as well as bad—before it, when the newly-delivered mother kept carefully to her house during forty days for fear of meeting another mother who had been confined on the same day. It was believed that of two such women meeting within forty days of their confinement, one would suffer a great misfortune. Two possible reasons for this quaint prohibition are apparent. It was either some remnant of a primitive, levitical period of purification or a means of ensuring that the mother wasted no time gossiping at the doorway or in the market place, to the neglect of her young family.

GROWING UP

With the child's first birthday comes the *'uccija*, or "choosing." A tray or basket is filled with an assortment of articles representing trades and professions—a book, a rosary, a candle, an inkstand, a sword—whichever the baby first picks up will indicate its bent in life. This simple means of divination is widespread, and little need be said of it except that some grains of corn are sometimes introduced as a symbol of generosity, suggesting that at one time the *'uccija* decided

[1] H. BAYLEY, *The Lost Language of Symbolism*.

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852 787 not the trade the child was to follow, but the deity whose particular care the child should be. Corn, sacred to Ceres the Earth-Mother, alone remains.

776 It will not, unfortunately, be long before the little Maltese makes the acquaintance of the Bogey-man. He is called *Babau*, and differs very little from the English bogey-man. He is black, and lurks in corners, cupboards, behind trees, and in ill-lit streets. Sometimes he will assume the shape of an ox, a ram, or a homely donkey. In Malta he has one virtue. He prefers to haunt those whose possessions have been unfairly come by. If Grez and Zeppu go in fear of *Babau* they have in the *Hares* a friend and protector.

Il Hares—for thus he, or it, is always referred to—takes many forms and performs a variety of tasks. It is possible that *Hares* is the generic name for several spirits, some good, some evil; but the children's *Hares* is our old friend Puck, or Robin Goodfellow. He appears to good children in the form of a little black dwarf, and taking them by the hand leads them off to play with him in some hidden world of his own where fair gardens, luscious sweetmeats, and marvellous toys abound. Only one condition attaches to these secret visits: the *Hares* must never be betrayed to parents or grown-ups. Should his visits be discussed with adults the gates of his magic world are for ever shut upon the garrulous child. I know a grown woman, sensible and devout, who tells of meeting the little black *Hares* frequently when she was a child. She firmly believes in him.

For the adult the *Hares* is a more fearsome creature. Some say that every household has its own particular guardian spirit, sometimes materialized as a black snake. The snake must be treated with respect. If it is injured, calamity will overtake the house and all who dwell in it. This snake would seem to be African in origin. The Bantu races, notably the Zulus, believe that their guardian spirits take upon them the body of a black snake.

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There is a *Hares*, too, who guards all hidden treasure. 776
If you are a deserving person he will lead you to the treasure; but you must never, on pain of death by strangulation, tell anyone how you discovered it.

There are persistent tales in Malta of a priceless treasure, hidden by the builders of the prehistoric temples. This treasure is known as "The Golden Bull," and is guarded by a most terrible and powerful *Hares*. No one has ever found it because, though some few have been selected by the *Hares* to be led to its hiding place, they have been unable to keep his secret, and he has strangled them together with the friends in whom they have confided.

There seems little reason to doubt that the Golden Bull is [174]
a legacy of the old gods—possibly of Mithra or Osiris—and that the great snake-like *Hares* who guards the treasure is no other than Set, guardian of the underworld. Perhaps the Bull exists, hidden deep in one of Malta's many caves.

There may be peasants who know where it is. Amongst the moor-folk of Devon and the peasants of Ireland there are many who know the whereabouts of the "crocks of gold," buried by the Pixies and the leprechauns; but none would dare disturb "Fairy Gold." So it is with the Maltese peasant. He would be a bold man who had dealings with the "Golden Bull."

From a very tender age the little Maltese will be occupied 538
in learning his Catechism and the significance of the rites and [795]
ceremonies of his faith. Though busied in this way there will be time, in the long winter evenings, for "Fairy Tales." Usually one member of the family will be able to read. If none [212]
can read someone will certainly know all the old tales and legends by heart, and will be expert in the correct way of recounting them. The family will gather round the story-teller and all, from grandmother to youngest grandchild, will listen with close attention to tales which many of them have heard hundreds of times.

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538 Before examining the shapes which the Old Things assume in the Maltese "fairy story," it may be well to examine the nature of the stories themselves. They are, like our own tales, an essential part of the national culture; but they differ from such classics as Little Red Riding Hood, The Three Bears, and The Arabian Nights. These latter belong to a literature. [178] The Maltese folk-tale is part of an oral tradition, ever changing as each succeeding generation has added its touch of contemporary colour and disguised some part of the original sense. Of the literature of the early Maltese, if, indeed, they possessed a literature, no trace remains. Thanks to some few patriots like Father Magri, collections of folk-tales in the vernacular have been made, and there has lately grown up some sort of Maltese literature. It is from collections such as Father Magri's that the literate peasant reads to the family. [177] The educated Maltese are all too ready to embrace a foreign culture, partly from necessity it is true, but also, because expediency has persuaded them that their own tongue, their own national culture, and their own folklore belong to "the lower orders." So for centuries the remnants of what may well be the oldest civilization in the West—linked with the lost Atlantis and with the dawn of human thought—have been left to peasants and to servants. These lowly folk have stubbornly maintained some life amongst embers which may yet be fanned into a bright flame.

The absence of a literature has one advantage. The folk-tales of a literature become standardized. They are, for that reason, no true mirror of the minds of a people. The people "grow up" but the story remains. "Once upon a time" means distinctly "a very long time ago"; but the *D'erba*—"on a time"—with which every Maltese story commences, might well be used equally of something which happened yesterday, last week, or in the days of King Suleiman. So stories which were once fraught with a religious significance have been

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turned into childish burlesques. The battles of gods become the village squabbles of yesterday. Not much imagination is needed to trace, in one such story, the transition of the race from fierce, bloodthirsty pride to easily contented, peace-loving good humour, from the cruelty of a Tiglath-Pileser to the cruelty of a naughty child. 538

Sometimes in these peasants' tales the tracks of the Old Things are plain; but often they are hardly visible, because the very story-tellers themselves repeat slavishly words, phrases, and whole sentences which are completely meaningless. The story would be incomplete and the listeners would hotly protest were these scraps of apparent nonsense omitted. Who has not wondered who "Marjorie Daw" was? Yet "See-Saw, Dragon's claw"—is definitely not correct, while "Rumpel Stiltskin" will always be "Rumpel Stiltskin."[1] These are probably mere "jingles," put in for the sake of rhyme or rhythm, but they must not be changed. In the Maltese tale the whole essence of the story is often hidden in some such meaningless word.

So the Maltese child grows up, with Mother Church for Faith, Philosophy, and Art, and the strange old tales of his people for literature.

JAHAN

No reference to Maltese "fairy-tales" would be complete without Jahan. He is the child-hero of a thousand unlikely situations. Impish and cunning in character, he gets in and out of trouble with unfailing ease and regularity, circumvents authority, and makes a long-nose at the powers of evil. He is the embodiment of the spirit of mischief in the character of the race; but his adventures are almost all of comparatively recent importation. He is Ali-Baba, Aladdin, Baron Munchausen, a lovable little fellow, but probably no older than

1 "Rumpel Stiltschen"—? "Raggle-Taggle Spindleshanks."

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538 the Arab domination. Jahan is merely a typically Maltese character placed in a series of foreign settings which have been changed to give an appearance of authenticity.

THE PEASANT AND THE SULTAN

539 From the familiar ground of Jahan's adventures it is a long step to the tale of "The Kaukam and the Kaukama." Here, again, is the typical Maltese hero who, by superior cunning, outwits the "Sultan"[1] who sets him, a poor peasant, a series of impossible tasks, but the atmosphere of the story is of the distant past.

> "Upon a time there was a peasant who loved his father as the light of his eyes. When the father became very old and decrepid, the son was obliged to do as everyone else did; he had to put his father into a cave-tomb: but he could not bring himself to block up the mouth of the cave. . . . He kept two holes. . . ."

The son then arranges to feed his father by leading his ewes to the cave, so that the old man may suck their milk through one of the holes.[2]

539 888 It has been suggested that the burial of the aged father who is kept alive and his advice sought is nothing more than a tradition of oracular response from ancestral tombs. Although this is a reasonable enough theory, there seems no cause to doubt the possibility that the facts are exactly as stated. To this day primitive tribes get rid of their aged and infirm members, for obvious reasons. Respect for the wisdom and experience of the old men and women whose advice was sufficiently valuable

[192] [1] There is no Maltese word for "king," "ruler" or "governor." "Sultan" is used in folk-tales broadly to describe any person in authority. The Italian "re" is rarely used in the true vernacular.

[2] L. GALEA AND MARGARET A. MURRAY, *Maltese Folk Tales*.

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to justify the inconvenience of caring for them is a lesson which had to be learned. "Ghalec ma tridx tmut l'ghagiusa, ghax aktar ma ticber izjed titghallem"—"The old woman does not want to die for the older she grows the more she learns"—is a common saying. For further proof that the story of the "Kaukam" has come down from very early times, there is the only other context in which the word *ghagiusa* means "an old woman" or, more accurately, "the oldest woman hereabouts" (normally the word means "a crab").

> "We have an old custom in Malta," says Bussutil,[1] "to make children believe that the ghagiusa is killed at noon on Thursday, the middle of Lent. Mothers, after fasting the first twenty days of Lent, send their children to the door of the parish church, or of some convent to see the sexton or some friar throwing the old woman from the steeple. . . ."

That the destruction of the old woman should occur in the middle of Lent—a period of fasting—is too much of a coincidence not to indicate that, in times when food was scarce, the aged folk were removed—either by being thrown from a high place or, to save the guilt of actual murder, walled up in a rock tomb, as in the case of the peasant. The association of the Church with the destruction of the *ghagiusa* suggests that in primitive times the removal of the aged was the responsibility of the pagan priests who performed the "ritual murders." These murders may have developed from a practical necessity into a sacrificial propitiation.

The story of the Kaukam takes its name from the ancient's first piece of advice to his perplexed son. Faced with the probability of losing his own crops while he cares for those of the Sultan, who has commanded that no man may plant his

[1] GALEA AND MURRAY, op. cit.

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539 own fields until he has planted an equal number for the Sultan, he is told, in rhyming verse:

> Buy the Kaukama and the Kaukam
> Count not the cost.
> Feed the field with clover and lucerne
> So the plough may bury them deep.
> At night till your fields, by day the Sultan's.
> Without the Kaukam and the two Kaukama
> Nought will remain but the strength of your hands.

539 1674 There is no one now who can say what they were that the peasant was to buy. The words have no longer any meaning. Can it be—for we have already seen that the story is of great antiquity—that the hero was the originator of draught oxen? Of the two words one would seem to be singular, the other plural. Perhaps the old man's advice to his son was to breed oxen for draught, known formerly only as food. The use of oxen for ploughing and threshing would have so lightened the peasant's labour as to make it possible for him to plant and tend the Sultan's fields as well as his own. That is what he succeeds in doing, with the aid of the mysterious "Kaukama and Kaukam," to the amazement and chagrin of the Sultan. "Without the Kaukam and the two Kaukama nought will remain but the strength of your hands" might reasonably read "Without the ox and the two she-oxen . . . ."

539 The Sultan is unwilling to be beaten by the peasant, and sets him more problems which place him repeatedly "within the onion" (Maltese for "the horns of a dilemma"). The old man, from his rock-tomb, furnishes the answer to every problem, and the peasant is at last forced to tell the Sultan his guilty secret.

> "The Sultan was highly delighted. . . . From this day forward no one shall bury either father or mother

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alive in a cave; for though the old man be useless for some things, yet they are always of use to give advice."[1] 539

THE DRAGON SLAYER

The fair princess carried off by the dragon appears in the tale called "Pietru Lagrimanti," or "The Eighth Son." The Princess is married, by her own wish, to a prince with golden teeth. In order to escape being married she has persuaded her father that only a young man whose teeth are all of gold shall have her. Perhaps it is as a punishment for her undutiful bargain that the Evil One himself appears in this unlikely shape, and having married her carries her off to his dwelling in the depths of a mountain. Here are his former wives bewitched into the shapes of beasts and fast imprisoned within seven doors of iron.

The Evil One changes into his proper shape and becomes "Dragun Draganti"—"The Serpent of Serpents." From one of the bewitched ladies the princess learns that there are seven brothers, sons of a Wise Woman in her father's kingdom, who are able to release her if they will carefully carry out certain instructions. A dove carries a message to the Sultan who immediately seeks out the Wise Woman and orders her to send her seven wonderful sons to the aid of his daughter. If they fail they will die disgraceful deaths—presumably having "their skins made into doormats," a favourite punishment in the Maltese folk-tale. If they succeed they will be made rich for life. Though armed each with his own magic power—one miraculously keen sighted, another equally keen of hearing, the third wonderfully strong, the fourth able "to steal the eggs from a sitting hen without her feeling anything," the fifth able "to lift up sleeping people without their waking," the sixth "able to build a tower of bronze in an instant"—the seven champions rescue the princess, only to be pursued by

[1] GALEA AND MURRAY, op. cit.

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539 the "Dragun Draganti," captured, and turned into beasts. For they omit to pronounce the spell which will restore the bewitched prisoners to their human shape. The recaptured princess spends several more years in captivity. One day the Evil One, who is not unkind to her, for he "truly loves her," tells her:

> ". . . There is only one person who can deliver you, and he is not born yet. He will be called Pietru Lagrimanti (Peter of Tears), and he will be the brother of the seven men who are turned into mules. But after he has killed me and smashed me up, if he does not burn my body completely, I shall throw myself into the pool of the Water of Life, and I shall rise again from the dead. That accursed one shall come into the world from his mother's tears."

The princess contrives to convey this information to her father, who again seeks out the Wise Woman.

> "The widow was so divided between sorrow that her seven sons had been turned into mules and joy that another son of hers would deliver his brothers and give them their human form again, that she burst into a torrent of tears, so great that there never was anything like it. She cried and she cried and she cried, and the King caught her tears in a golden cup and made her drink them.
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> "In time her eighth son was born. When he was born he was enormously powerful, and could speak, but he was deformed with a head larger than his whole body. As soon as he was born the widow went and told the King, and the King returned with her to see the baby.
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> As soon as the baby saw the King, he said, 'Give me some clothes.'

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'I have nothing to give you to put on,' said the King.

'Give me one of your shirts,' said the baby.

'It will be much too big for you,' said the King.

'Never mind, I can hold it up,' said the baby. So the King gave him one of his shirts.

'Now,' said the baby, 'I am ready to go and fetch your daughter.'

'O yes!' cried the King. 'Only tell me what you need and I will give it to you.'

'All I want,' said the baby, 'is a hammer, just a bit of a thing.'

The King showed him two or three hammers.

'No, no,' said the baby. 'Those won't do at all; I must have a bigger one, about nine kantars (a kantar is about a hundredweight) in weight.'

The King sent him to the dockyard with the guards, ordering them to obey the baby's commands. Everybody was bursting with laughter at the sight of the baby with his head bigger than his body and holding up his long shirt lest he should trip over it.

The baby made the people of the Dockyard show him hammers of all kinds, but he liked none of them. He looked about, here, there, and everywhere, his eyes shining, and at last he spied a great block of iron weighing nine kantars. He ordered that a hole should be bored through it and a handle made to carry it by.

'What do you want the handle of?' they asked.

'Of iron, so that it will be strong,' said the baby.

As soon as it was made he threw it across both his shoulders and went to the King.

'I am ready to start now,' he said."[1]

The miraculous dwarf, needless to say, rescues the prin-

[1] GALEA AND MURRAY, op. cit.

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cess and releases all the captives, including his seven elder brothers.

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This story bears traces of a number of legends. The princess may well be Summer, wedded to Autumn, the season with the golden teeth of ripe corn. Imprisoned throughout the winter, the failure of the seven brothers to rescue her may represent the brighter periods of the Maltese mid-winter, followed by the wild weather of early spring. The recurrence of the number seven, in the seven sons and the seven doors is interesting. Seven has always borne a sacred character. It is associated with Indra from whom the seven great rivers of Hindu mythology are supposed to flow. Ishtar or Astarte was clothed in seven garments and passed through seven gates when she descended into the Underworld. Certain details of ths Assyrian and Phoenician story of Ishtar's visit to the underworld suggest that the captive Princess is herself no other than that once powerful goddess whose temples are known to have existed in Malta. Ishtar, descending into the Land of Darkness is admitted on condition that at each of the seven gates she shall shed one of the seven mystic garments from which she draws her divine power. In the Maltese tale, the Evil One causes the princess to remove her shoes—for no reason that is now apparent. At last Ishtar stands before the Queen of the Underworld naked and helpless. She is stricken with all manner of diseases from which she recovers at last when a rescuer, created by her father, the God of Light, releases her and bathes her in the Waters of Life. In the Maltese version it is in connection with the serpent that the Waters of Life appear.

In detailing the attributes of Pietru's seven brothers, the story omits to give any special power to the seventh brother. It may be that there were originally only six brothers, making the monstrous child-hero one of those seven sons, world-renowned for their magic powers.

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Pietru Lagrimanti's strange birth has a parallel in Egyptian mythology, where a man is born of the tears of the deity Nu who personified the Celestial Ocean from which the life-force even of the gods themselves was drawn.

Armed with his great hammer, "Il Lagrimanti" resembles the Dragon Slayers of every mythology, from Bel-Marduk of the Assyrians to Thor of the Scandinavians and Finn M'Cull of the Celts; but he is sadly fallen from his high estate and become a figure of fun, with his huge head and his shirt too long for him. A primitive respect for deformity or else some modification of the monstrous shapes of a pagan Pantheon may account for the baby's misshapen figure. The long shirt has clearly been added to provide a comic figure of the sort dear to the Maltese sense of the ridiculous.

The stories of the Kaukam and of Pietru Lagrimanti are but two of many tales in which pursuit of the Old Things, through the labyrinth which time has built around them, is a fascinating pastime. Enough has been said to illustrate the way in which a tenacious handful of peasants has handed down, through the centuries, legends of great antiquity—in some cases nearly intact.

GROWN UP

The Maltese—a people as old as time—are a people who never grow up. In this lies their chief charm. For Zeppu the passing of childhood means only an understanding of the ancient price of manhood:

> "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread till thou return to the earth, out of which thou wast taken. . . ."

For Grez the flowering into womanhood brings only the divine command:

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"In sorrow shalt thou bring forth children and thou shalt be under thy husband's power, and he shall have dominion over thee. . . ."

In all other things they remain children and "of such is the Kingdom. . . ."

So that the curse of Adam may lie less heavily upon these children of an unfertile rock, the Old Things have blessed them with an uncanny ability to make flowering fields out of nothing.[1]

THE SKY AND THE SOIL

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The weather and husbandry lore of the peasant has much to do with the success of his untiring hands. Much of this peasant wisdom is incomprehensible to the town-bred Maltese (too often they have lost touch or dismiss it—in hybrid Italian—as *ignuranza*); much of it has exact parallels in the lore of the English countryside, as for example the following:

Maltese	*English*
821 171 539 "The Moon eats everything."	"Fair weather with a full moon."
"The stars wink at the coming wind."	"Twinkling stars foretell high winds."
"Sky like a turtle's back; heavy rains, fierce winds."	"A rounded cloud with flattened base carries rainfall in its face."
"Clouds with heads of men and beasts bring in the thunder and the lightning."	

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[1] During the early years of the last century Malta's cotton crop was valued at an average of one and a half millions sterling annually. The cotton industry, dating from Roman times and earlier, is now practically dead.

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Maltese	*English*
"Red sky at evening, harness your mules. Red sky at morning, herd your beasts."	"Red sky at night, Shepherd's delight. Red sky in the morning Shepherd's warning."
"Ill weather comes, ahead or astern, when the cat sneezes."	"The cat washes herself before stormy weather."

Often it appears that sheer nonsense is mixed with sound common sense. Typical of the mixed "sense" and "nonsense" is the following:

"The first autumnal produce of the wild fig is called by the Maltese *Barru*. A second crop which takes place in winter is supposed to be due to the outcome of the first produce. This is called *Carru*, and is supposed to bring forth the third outcrop which appears in spring time and is recognized as the *dukkar* or real fertilizer of the fig. This fruit is cut and hung up in pairs on the bough of the fig tree.

"The male fruit (*dukkar*) is usually full of a colony of minute winged insects by the produce of which, the Maltese husbandman identifies the real fertilizing fruit.

"The pomegranate is supposed to be fertilized by the flowers of the wild parsnip, and for this purpose bunches of these flowers are thrown over the pomegranate tree when in flower. *Dakra*, probably from *dakar* = to fertilize, is the name given to the wild parsnip by the Maltese husbandman.

"The male flowers of the wild carob-tree (*baghal*) are thrown over the branches of the female plant to favour impregnation.

Small pieces of coarse stone are still hung up in the jujube-tree with a view to securing a good produce.

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241 823 [171] Husbandmen would still consider that queer operation as a medium of impregnation (*Dukkar*). This strange usage may, however, be traced amongst the *fellahin* of Upper Egypt, where, as Professor Sayce points out in his contribution to the *Cairene and Upper Egypt Folklore* (Folklore, Vol. XXXI, No. 2, 1920, p. 200) phallic symbols are still hung up to protect the melons and sugar-cane. The old Maltese practice of hanging up stones to the jujube-tree may therefore be considered as a modification of this early phallic worship."[1]

The sense contained in these practices requires no elucidation. The horticulturist with his camel hair brush does no better than the peasant with the male carob flowers. The votive stones are a silent appeal to the oldest and greatest of the Old Things, to the All-Father, Giver of Life and Fertility, whose ancient and enduring image, from Drizzlecombe in Devon to the High Places of Melanesia, is the Rock or Stone without shape—the altar of "The Unknown God"—"Thou art Peter and upon this Rock. . . ."

[538] Traces of this rock-cult are plentiful enough in Maltese folklore. Children who throw stones into a well or into the sea will one day have to gather them up by their eyelashes. The "old stones" (i.e. *menhir*) resent being moved and are, for that reason, twice as heavy as ordinary stones.

751 825 776 "St. Paul's tongue"—a valuable amulet against the evil-eye and against all venoms—takes the form of fossilized teeth found in the ancient rocks. The blessed tongue which preached the gospel of the Redeemer is enshrined for ever in rock, the symbol of the Father.

776 823 St. Paul's rock-cell, in which he is reputed to have lived, has the miraculous property that no matter how much of the rock is cut away its bulk grows no less—a clear expression

[1] Lecture by Mr. Cremona at the University of Malta in 1922.

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of the eternal and immutable nature of the All-Father whose symbol the rock is.

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THE MONTHS

The Maltese, like the Scandinavians and the Russians, personify the months, giving to each a human character in keeping with its weather. A delightful little story called "The Gifts of the Months" serves the dual purpose of impressing the qualities of each month upon the listener, while stressing the importance of accepting the best qualities in every season without complaining about the disadvantages. Two brothers, one a poor peasant, the other a rich merchant, each meet the twelve months. On being questioned as to what people say about the months in his part of the country, the peasant recites a number of couplets in praise of each month:

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"'Friend,' said January, 'what do people say about January in your part of the world?'[1]

The poor man answered, 'It is a month of rain and of plenty. Vegetables grow and all that your heart can desire.'

'Do you know any rhymes about it?' asked January.

'Just imagine asking!' cried the poor man. 'As many as ever you like.'

'Tell me some, please,' said January.

The poor man then repeated the three following: 'January sits in the cosiest nook in the house. A warm January makes full barns in the summer. The January moon brings the girls out of the caves for they think it is daylight.'

January smiled and the others laughed. Then February took up the running. 'Friend, what do they say about February?'

[1] GALEA AND MURRAY, op. cit.

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'He is January's own brother, bless him,' said the poor man. 'Quantities of rain and everyone satisfied, for February fills up all and brings riches to the peasant's house. In the month of February all mistakes are discovered. In February sow, water, and tend the small-leaved basil.'

'What a lot you know!' they all cried.

'Friend,' said March, 'what about March?'

'Days long and beautiful,' answered the peasant. 'The cold braces you like iron, and a little wind is always desirable.'

The poor man answered in this way each question of the rest of the months, letting his tongue wag in their honour, praising each one up to the skies."

The merchant, in reply to the same set of questions, complains bitterly about each month. The peasant is given a magic cloth of the sort used to cover bread, which provides him and his family with food and drink in plenty. The rich merchant receives a stick which beats him and his wife unmercifully every time it is addressed.

821 787

Apart from the expected, usual characters of the twelve months, there is a method whereby the year's weather may be foretold. The twelve days preceding Christmas Eve are known as "presages." Each day foretells the weather of its corresponding month during the forthcoming year. Here, again, is seen the shadow of Mithra—the "Great Fecundator"—no period could be more ominous than the sacred twelve days preceding his feast.

FAITH

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Where knowledge fails or some error in complying with the traditional rules is made, Faith steps in. A farmer will send for the village priest to bless his fields when he has sown

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at the wrong season and so set right his error. The blessing is accompanied by the burning of leaves of the wild olive which have been blessed in Holy Week. Blessing, accompanied by sacred "fumigation," is very widely used—by fishermen to ensure a good catch, by newly married folk to ensure a happy house. 771 782 [226] [585]

GETTING MARRIED

Zeppu and Grez will think long and seriously before they get married. In an island where poverty is the rule rather than the exception, and there is no "dole," there can be no haphazard mating. Zeppu will wait until he has a sufficient competence and Grez will contribute her share of the common resources in the form of a "dot" which she, herself, has earned and saved. Until very recently all marriages were arranged by a professional "go-between"—an old woman wise in the ways of the world and in suitable matings. Even now there is little choice left to the girl. 584 [735]

In this matter of marriage, so hedged about with Christian law and custom, the Old Things still command a place. Their hands are perhaps more apparent than in the marriage customs of all other countries—themselves pagan enough in origin. 584 824

In the story which has been quoted the month of February is praised, amongst other reasons, because it is then that the "small-leaved basil" is tended and watered. The reference might be rendered "In the Spring a young man's fancy . . ." for the sweet basil is the sign and symbol that a marriageable girl awaits a suitor.

The small bush, either of basil or of the Madonna rose, is carefully tended and placed on the sill of an upper window. A well-grown plant is an indication that the maiden will make a good wife and mother. [787]

A suitor, seeing the "marriage bush" at an upper window,

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584 824 will walk up and down the village street wearing a red carnation behind his right ear and a red handkerchief thrown over his left shoulder. The shy maiden will be peeping from behind the latticed window, probably accompanied by one or two giggling, curious younger sisters.

The symbolic bush has about it something of the atmosphere of the Song of Solomon:

> My beloved is unto me as a
> cluster of camphire in the vineyards of En-Gedi . . .
>
> I am the Rose of Sharon and
> the lily of the valleys. . . .
>
> A garden inclosed is my sister, my spouse . . .
>
> Awake, O North Wind; and come, thou south;
> blow upon my garden that the spices
> thereof may flow out.
> Let my beloved come into his garden,
> and eat his pleasant fruits.

[822] [171] The red carnation and the red handkerchief, badges of the lover, are of that colour which is sacred to Venus. The wearing of the flower has its parallel amongst the Polynesians, to whom a red flower behind the right ear means "I am looking for a sweetheart."

584 Official "courting" will not begin until the "go-between" and the parents have arranged matters to everybody's satisfaction.

585 801 171 After the religious ceremony the young folk separate, returning to their homes for a period of eight days before setting up house. The reason for the choice of the number "eight" may not be without significance; for eight, it is said, was one of the signs of the goddess Astoreth, while the ancient Egyptians had a company of eight gods who were the Fathers and Mothers of the World. The double form of the figure "8"

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was anciently used to represent the tying of Life with Spirit. Its association with the "True Lovers' Knot" of our grandmothers is obvious. There is Biblical authority, too, for the separation of husband from wife, in the incident between Tobias and the Angel Raphael.

Tobias (or Tobit) is about to be wedded to the maiden whose former seven husbands have been slain on the bridal night by an evil spirit. The angel says, "For they who in such manner receive matrimony as to shut out God from themselves to their lust, as the horse and mule, which they have not understanding. Over them the devil hath power. . . . Keep thyself continent from her. . . ."[1]

So far the marriage customs which remain extant—only one or two generations separate Zeppu and Gretz from the more primitive customs. Here is what a Maltese writer has to say of marriages in the not very distant past:

> "The articles of the contract having been settled, and the marriage portion agreed upon, the young man sent his intended bride a present consisting of a certain fish ornamented with garlands of ribband, with a ring or some costly jewel in its mouth.
>
> The first interview was then fixed to take place in presence of the parents and their kinsfolk, best friends, and neighbours, who were regaled with sweetmeats and other refreshments.
>
> Before this meeting took place, the mothers of the two young people retired either into an arbour in the garden or some separate apartment, where they prepared a mixture of aniseed, aromatic plants, salt, and honey with which they rubbed the bride's lips, with the idea of rendering her affable and prudent. She was then conducted into the room where her future husband awaited

[1] *Tobias*, VI, 17–18.

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584 her arrival, who presented her with a ring on which
[301] was engraved two hands united—the emblem of mutual faith—together with bracelets, necklaces, and a gold chain—she presenting him in return with a handkerchief trimmed with lace and bows of ribbon.

This ceremony is called *il chelma*, which means the engagement.

585 On the morning of the wedding day the most honoured
[292] personage among the husband's relations threw a fine
[301] white veil over the bride's head—who wore a brocade or velvet dress, in which the other relations made certain rents for the purpose of affixing small golden shells.

[533] The bridal procession then proceeded to the Church for the ceremony, attended by musicians playing on different instruments, and singers who sang stanzas in praise of the young couple. These musicians were preceded by three men, the first bearing on his head a basin of white earth on which was placed a big cake with two figures representing the bridegroom and the bride—the
[431] man who carried this basin wore also a scarf with a round cake hanging from it. The second carried a basket filled with sugar plums and candied nuts, which one of the relations distributed among such acquaintances he hap-
[532] pened to meet. In the middle of the basket was a handkerchief folded in the form of a pyramid and ornamented with the images of the Blessed Virgin, St. Joseph, and the Infant Jesus. The third man was constantly employed in burning perfumes. The bride and bridegroom followed, walking under a canopy of crimson velvet carried by four of the principal persons who attended the wedding. The rest of the relations and invited friends, called the *Haddara*, closed the procession.

[202] The arrival of the bridal procession at the church was announced by the ringing of bells. The officiating

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The officiating priest was then presented with a basin containing a cake, a handkerchief, and two bottles of wine—the usual fee on such occasions. When the marriage ceremony was completed, everyone returned from church in the same order as before.

As the newly married couple wended their way to their house, the women and girls who crowded the balconies showered flowers upon them also nuts and grains and wheat, and on their entering the house one of the kinsfolk threw from one of the windows or balcony a few handfuls of barley and some small coins on their heads.

The nuptial feast took place immediately afterwards; but the bride ate in a separate apartment. The repast being ended, she was seated next to her husband and drank out of the same cup.

At a village wedding the company danced during the feast, each dancer throwing a piece of money to the fiddlers and each guest contributing a fowl to the repast.

The bride always passed a week in her father's house, after which she was received with much pomp by her husband, whose relations gave a great feast which was called *il hargia*."[1]

The bridegroom's symbolic present of a fish is very likely connected with fecundity, for the fish was regarded as an emblem of fecundity by the Assyrians and the Phoenicians. It is not, however, in this connection alone that the fish is a potent symbol. Prudence (apparently a virtue highly prized in a Maltese wife—Salt, another symbol of prudence, is included in the ingredients with which the bride's lips are anointed), and Wisdom were anciently supposed to be the properties of numerous Sacred Fish. Finn M'Cull, in the Irish legend, "Happens upon the Salmon of Knowledge . . ."

[1] BUSUTTIL, op. cit.

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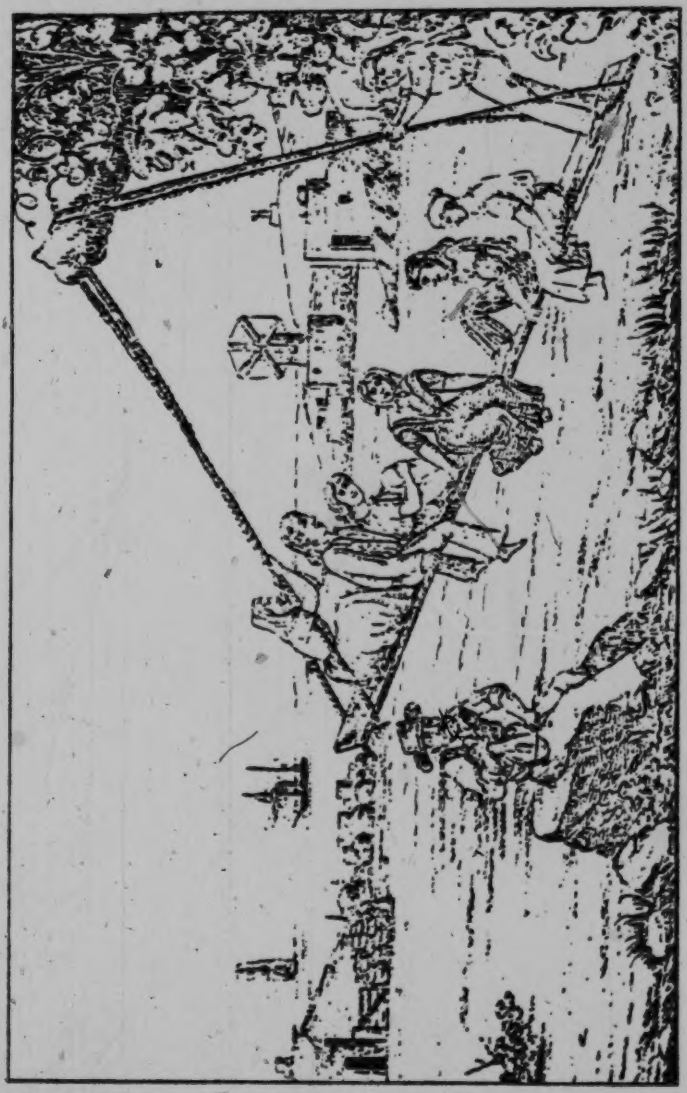

PEASANTS CELEBRATING "LAPSI"—FESTA OF THE ASCENSION
(From an old Maltese print)

[facing P. 128]

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174 584 825 which conferred on him "such Wisdom, Prowess, and good fortune . . . that Fame and Prosperity always attended him thereafter." Tennyson, describing his mystic Lady of the Lake, has:

> And o'er her breast floated the Sacred Fish.

The Saviour Himself was symbolized by the early Christians as a fish. Julius Africanus, an early Christian writer, said of Christ that He was the Great Fish, caught by the Hook of God, whose flesh nourishes the whole world.[1]

This bridal fish, then, may be in some sense a sacramental offering as well as a mere symbol.

584 789 823 The anointing of the bride's lips is yet another custom which, like the miniature "garden inclosed" of the marriageable girl, recalls the Canticle of Canticles:

> Thy lips my spouse are as a dropping honeycomb, honey and milk are under thy tongue. . . .[2]

585 174 The whole of this marriage ceremony is reminiscent of the old Fertility cults—the cakes, sweetmeats, nuts, grain, all in honour of the fertile Mother whose bountiful Earth is carried in a bowl bearing effigies of the bride and bridegroom whom it is hoped she will bless with her own fecundity and riches.

EVERYDAY HABITS

771 785 Grez, the housewife, will go about her daily tasks carefully following a thousand small rules, most of which have their English parallels. She will never cut a loaf without first making the Sign of the Cross on it with forefinger or knife. If the loaf falls to the ground, she will kiss it by way of asking pardon. She will not sweep her house after sunset for fear of [754] sweeping away good fortune. She will take care not to throw her "combings" out of doors. Should anyone wish her ill it

[1] *The Lost Language of Symbolism.* [2] *Song of Solomon*, IV, ii.

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will only be necessary for a "wise woman" or witch to spit on the hair while uttering a curse to bring misfortune upon the head which nourished it.

Grez will be careful not to laugh too heartily on a Friday—when the memory of the Crucifixion should make all sad. She will make the Sign of the Cross on leaving her house, on entering any vehicle or boat for no matter how short a journey, on cutting a piece of new cloth, before her baby's mouth when it yawns—so that evil spirits may not enter. On meeting a deformed or maimed person she will sign her corresponding limb or part of her body with the Cross.

When she brings flowers into her house she will be as careful to exclude the acacia as any West-country woman to avoid "may" or whitethorn, for the spiky Maltese acacia is the "thorn" of Palestine wherewith the Saviour was crowned.

These are but a few of the small ways in which the peasant woman pays a somewhat mixed homage to the Old Things as well as to the tenets of her Faith. In her favour it may be said that her "superstitions" are more logical than those of such folk who habitually "touch wood" or object to a third cigarette from one match.

THE FESTAS

The Festa, primarily a religious festival and a Holy Day of Obligation, provides the only relaxation for a hardworking and frugal people. Such simple pleasures as a meal of unaccustomed meat, a little wine, processions, and fireworks give full rein to the most lovable, childlike side of the national character. The importance attaching to these periodical holidays is well illustrated by an old rhyme:

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THE SWEETHEART'S BARGAIN

In the marriage contract, they have it for a pact,
That he takes her to the Feste and sets her on a wall.
That he buys her cakes of sweetmeat, of the sort with hempseed made.
For that's the kind of sweetmeat a bride likes best of all.

It is believed that such a clause used actually to be embodied in the written contract drawn up by the parents and the go-between.

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Each little hamlet has its own feast, in honour of its own particular patron. Each has its own peculiar forms. Of the national feasts that of St. John naturally occupies a place of considerable importance. Certain aspects of its celebration, however, indicate that the Order of St. John was not alone responsible for the enthusiasm which this saint inspires.

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Busuttil, who has already been quoted at some length, writes of the Feast of St. John as follows:

> "Not unlike other nations, the Maltese are not indifferent in celebrating the Nativity of St. John by kindling great fires in the public streets, and giving their children dolls to carry in their arms on this day, in order to make good the prophecy respecting the Baptist 'Multi in nativitate ejus gaudebunt.'
>
> Days and even weeks before this festival groups of children are seen going out into the country fields to gather straw, twigs, and all sorts of other combustibles which they store up for St. John's Eve.
>
> On the night of June 23rd, the day before the festival of the Saint, great fires are kindled in the streets, squares, and market places of the towns and villages of the Island, and as fire after fire blazes out of the darkness of that summer night, the effect is singularly striking.
>
> These fires are sometimes kept up for hours, being

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continually fed by the scores of by-standers who take great delight in throwing amidst the flames some old rickety piece of furniture which they consider as lumber in their houses. Lots of happy and reckless children, and very often men, are seen merrily leaping in succession over and through the crackling flames."[1]

At the time of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, the Grand Master himself, soon after the *Angelus*, used to leave his palace, accompanied by the Grand Prior, the Bishop and two bailiffs, to set fire to some pitch barrels which were placed for the occasion in the square facing the sacred hospital.

Great crowds used to assemble here in order to assist at this ceremony. The setting ablaze of the five casks, and later on, of the eight casks,[2] by the Grand Master, was a signal for the others to kindle their fires in the different parts of the town.

Various opinions are entertained by antiquarian writers with regard to the origin of these fires on St. John's Eve.

From the account given by Jacob Grimm in his *Deutsche Mythologie*, pp. 583, 593, it would appear that the great blaze reserved for the eve of the feast of the nativity of St. John the Baptist on June 23rd is observed with similar rites in every country of Europe.

The kindling of the fire, the leaping over or through the flames clearly show that these rites are essentially of

[1] Leaping over the fires is mentioned among the superstitious rites at the Palilia feasts, instituted in honour of *Pales*, the goddess of shepherds (in the calends of May) in Ovid's Fasti.

"Moxque per accensos stipulae crepitantis acervos
traijcias celeri strenua membra pede."

The learned Moresin appears to have been of opinion that the custom of leaping over these fires is a vestige of the ordeal, where to be able to pass through fires with safety, was held to be an indication of innocence.

[2] Eight being the languages of the Order.

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heathen origin. They are obviously connected with the worship of the sun, and were doubtless practised long before the Baptist was born. In old heathen times the summer and winter solstices were the two greatest and most widespread festivals in Europe.

These fires (says another writer) are evidently a remnant of the ancient Bel fires of the Druids, at the *Beil* time, which was at the beginning of May. But why do they chiefly occur on the night before the festival of the Saint, instead of the old period of *Beil* time which was the beginning of May? I do not believe that a satisfactory explanation of these circumstances has yet been given by any of the antiquaries. It was perhaps to transfer the practice or custom of lighting these fires from a pagan to a Christian object.

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The Nativity of St. John Baptist was a great and solemn festival of the Church, like those of the other great festivals of Martyrs, the eve or vigil of it was, in the early ages, commemorated with appropriate ceremonies. The public devotions were kept up all night in the churches, of which the Saint was the Patron, and the solemnities of the next day were ushered in amongst types and figures appropriate to the occasion. Amongst these was probably introduced a large and unusual exhibition of lights to typify the Baptist who, in the Gospel, is called by the Saviour himself 'A burning, shining light.' What could have been more natural than that the early Christian authorities would have directed the people to light their anniversary fires on the eve of this Saint, and thus give to the national custom a Christian instead of a pagan significance? To this feeling, most likely, is due the transfer of the fires to June 23rd, and perhaps, too, this perpetuation to this day amongst the people.

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Gebelin, in his *Allegories Orientales*, accounts in the following manner for the custom of making fires on Midsummer Eve.

'Can one,' says he, 'omit to mention here the St. John fires, those sacred fires, kindled about midnight, in the very moment of the solstices, by the greatest part of ancient as well as of modern nations—a religious ceremony of the most remote antiquity which was observed for the prosperity of states and people and to dispel every kind of evil? The origin of this fire which is still retained by so many nations, though enveloped in the mist of antiquity, is very simple. It was a *feu de joie*, kindled the very moment the year began; for the first of all years, and the most ancient that we know of, began at this month of June, hence the very name of this month, *Junior*, meaning the youngest, which is renewed; while that of the preceding one is May, *Major*, meaning the ancient.

'Thus the one was the month of young people whilst the other belonged to old men.

'These *feu de joie* were accompanied, at the same time, with vows and sacrifices for the prosperity of the people and the fruits of the earth.

'They danced also round this fire, and the most active leaped over it. Each on departing took a fire brand, and the remains were scattered to the winds, which at the same time that it dispersed the ashes, was thought to expel every evil. When after a long train of years, the year ceased to commence at this solstice, the custom of making these fires, at this time, was still continued by force of habit. Besides, it would have deprived the people of a day of joy in times when there were not many of them; thus the custom has been continued and handed down to us.'

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Dr. Milner is of opinion that the fires lighted up all over the continent, on the eve of June 24th, are not intended as the idolatrous worship of the sun or *Baal*, the Philistine God of Fire, but in honour of Christ's precursor, as alluding to his character of bearing witness to the light (John i. 7) and of his being himself a bright and shining light (John v. 35)."

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It is of some interest to compare the Maltese account with the following notes on English Midsummer customs which appeared in the *Radio Times* recently under the signature of Felix Felton, compere of so many excellent folklore broadcasts:

"Midsummer's Eve is also St. John's Eve. . . . Sermons on that day used to be preached out of doors in the quadrangle of Magdalen College, Oxford, 'that the preaching might more nearly resemble that of John the Baptist in the wilderness'; and bonfires were lighted in various parts of the country, 'betokennynge that Saint Johan was a lanterne of light to the people.' Then comes a collection of curious legends and superstitions connected with certain herbs. The legends attribute to these all kinds of magical powers; women, it is said, can tell by hempseed[1] who their husband is to be; and in Shropshire it was believed that those who failed to hang up St. John's Wort outside their doors would suffer by their cows going dry and their hens refusing to lay. Finally come the Midsummer's Eve revels and festivals—the old London processions, the revels at Penzance, the gatherings at Stonehenge, and the bonfire festivities still held to-day. . . .

As varied as the customs themselves are the possible

[1] Compare the reference to hempseed in "The Sweetheart's Bargain."

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explanations of them. Two kinds of explanations have to be treated with some caution, the local one and the Christian one . . . and we shall find ourselves going back for the true causes to the worship of the sun and of the seasons. 796 171

The revel, easily degenerating into the brawl, has always found opposition, as in the thunderous verse of an old poet who branded the Midsummer processions as

> Of Edinburgh the great idolatrie
> And manifest abomination.

Other forces have militated against them besides the disapproval of the austere. As another old writer has rather obscurely remarked: 'No suffimen is a greater fugator of phantosmes than gunpowder.' Other such fugators are periods of increased popular education and of quickened pace in national life. These forces have been active enough in our own times, and few Midsummer customs have survived them; but all of them were originally the spontaneous outcome of certain impulses in the make-up of human beings, and thus, past or present, they are of permanent interest to us."

There seems little doubt that the Night of Fires belongs to that very early civilization of which, as has been suggested elsewhere, the Maltese are amongst the direct descendants. What more appropriate than the adaptation of these ancient fires to the honour of that Saint beneath whose banner there happened all that is most valiant in Maltese history? 372 796 174

In one form or another practically all the "seasonal" customs familiar in other countries appear in Malta: All Fools' Day, with its affinity to the Hindu festival of Huli; May Day, when the children gather green bows in honour of Flora; New Year's Day, when lime is strewn on doorsteps in token of good luck; but Malta's most popular holiday is the period of Carnival. Its 796 [527] [171]

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796 adoption by the English garrison may have done much to save it from extinction. Here is a description of Carnival, written in 1850:[1]

> "The Carnival is another source of popular amusement; this begins on the Sunday preceding Lent, and lasts for three days. The afternoon is the principal time of the feast, during which numerous persons in masks are seen walking about the streets, endeavouring to amuse themselves, and to be a source of amusement to others. The variety of dresses used on these occasions is beyond description. Not a few pride themselves in playing all kinds of antics in a black habit, with long red horns, and a huge tail of the same colour. Calesses filled with ladies follow in a train through the principal streets, who readily engage in pelting confits and peas with any of the by-standers who will enter the lists with them. The number of respectable persons, however, who mask in the public streets has greatly diminished within the last few years, and it is to be hoped that their good example will soon be followed by an entire relinquishment of so absurd [783] and foolish a diversion. The first Sunday after the carnival, most of those persons who have masked repair to the parish church of Casal Zabbar, called *della Grazia*, by way of penance for their follies.
>
> On Saturday preceding the first day of the feast the *Parata* is celebrated. This consists of several companies of men, dressed up in gay ribbons, and armed with wooden staves and shields, who meet together under the houses of the wealthy, and perform several evolutions, striking their shields and dancing at the sound of music. This is concluded by raising up a little girl, splendidly arrayed, and girded with a small dagger, which she is

[1] G. P. BADGER, *A Description of Malta and Gozo*.

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taught to wave, while the band plays the national anthem, 796
'God Save the King.' In the time of the Order they proceeded to the palace to receive permission for the celebration of the Carnival. Their request was signified to the Grand Master by one of the knights, and upon the boon being granted, they immediately performed a dance in front of the palace, and afterwards before the door of any other person, whom they thought would pay them for their trouble.'

The origin of this amusement must be sought for in 796
the annals of pagan rites, which Christianity has not 171
succeeded in abolishing in several countries of Europe. In a work on Malta, *Par un voyageur François*, the author ranks it with a popular feast very ancient in Thessaly, the *Salzea* of the Babylonians, the *Chronia* of the Athenians, and the *Saturnalia* of Rome, which many of the early Christians continued, notwithstanding the zealous efforts which were made by the Church to abolish them."

It will be noted that the public "masque" was regarded 796
as "an absurd and foolish diversion." The "diversion" must 656
at some time have proved rather more dangerous than absurd, for the wearing of masks after sunset is now forbidden by law. It is of interest also to note that an attempt on the part [669]
of a strict Sabbatarian Governor who hailed from north of the Tweed to abolish the merrymaking on the Sunday of Carnival led to a major civil disturbance which could only be quelled at bayonet point, and which is still remembered by those who are, for one cause or another, "agin' the Government!"

DYING

Zeppu's tired hands are at rest. They lie, brown and calloused, 763
upon the coverlet. The village bell tolls urgently. The *fratelli*

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763 The fratelli
794 —lay brethren of the congregation—hurry from their homes to take their places in the procession of the Viatecum. Marching rapidly, like a company of soldiers, headed by a peasant ringing a staccato, commanding bell, some bearing tapers, some censers, all chanting the prayers for the dying, they pass [793] quickly through the village street. Under a canopy, borne by two sturdy *fratelli*, goes the priest in his bright vestments, bearing God to the dying man.

The women hurry to place a light in their windows, kneel and pray as God passes.

So, with such poor pomp as these simple folk can muster, 764 the Prince of Peace comes to dying Zeppu. The funeral rites [071] and customs differ hardly at all nowadays from those of other Catholic countries. But Zeppu's grandfather could remember a time when the Old Things were much in evidence.

764 There were the "Wailing Women" (whose name *neuuieha* 767 survives in the sense of "one who constantly complains"). They wore long black robes, and chanted death-songs whose burden was a combination of praise for the deceased's virtues and rebuke for his having left them. They cut the vines from the courtyard, overturned the furniture, broke pottery, and mixed the fragments with soot and ashes, staining the doors [302] of the bereaved house with the mixture. They cut pieces of their hair and scattered them over the coffin.

765 If the dead man possessed horses, cows, goats, all their tails [262] had pieces cut from them in token of mourning. There was a [764] form of "wake" where funeral cakes and boiled wheat were eaten. A carpet was spread over the tomb to prevent the unware from treading on it.

[372] No fire was lit in the house for three days after the funeral. [302] The women kept to the house for forty days. The men, having remained indoors for seven days, went unshaven.

764 Here are clear signs of the most primitive funeral rites 174 and *taboos*. Death was a pollution—hence the segregation of

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the relatives and the staining of the doors. Provision was made for the deceased's comfort in the other life by the breaking of his pottery—thus releasing the *manes* to accompany him in death.

The wake was a death feast originally designed to provide a sort of communion with the departed. Similarly, the cutting of the mourner's hair was intended to furnish a ritual link with the dead. Primitive tribes express the same idea in cannibalism and in funeral mutilations.

The cutting of the animals' tails was very probably a version of the sacrifice in expiation of the dead man's sins.

> ". . . Then they brought out a splendid white horse, and the priest cut some hair from its mane and tail and burned it on the altar, shouting 'A sacrifice!' . . . 'I saw poor Weland's face through the smoke, and I couldn't help laughing . . .' says Puck." [1]

Based on fear, as these "ancient fictions" were, they yet hid certain eternal truths.

The Old Things, with their complicated rituals, their theologies of terror, served their turn in leading mankind some distance on his upward march. Nowhere is their vague disembodied presence more felt than in Malta's rapidly dwindling countryside, where every stone may well have housed one of their altars. Not all of the Old Things were evil. The good ones have been adopted by Mother Church; but there remain those restless, evil ones who have never bowed down to the Nazarene. They hide in the shadows, angry and resentful.

THE HOUR OF THE OLD THINGS

Let us go out, at the third or fourth hour after midnight. Away from the clamorous ballrooms of the cramped city of

[1] *Puck of Pook's Hill.*

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788 178 palaces and "prairie oysters." Out into the still, shadowed villages. Not those which fringe the military roads, but those lying in quiet hollows, away from the smell of petrol.

Let us sit for a while on some low wall and be silent.

It will seem that all the world sleeps. Only the darkness beneath walls and in windows and deep-cut doorways will be astir with a ghostly wakefulness. We shall see the little, sleeping houses and the quiet fields, stretching out in gentle waves of purple shadow and moonlit stone. There will be a wayside shrine, with an oil lamp burning fitfully in the light wind that heralds "Dawn's left hand." The sculptured saint will be deep in shadow save for the halo of yellow light painting strange meaning on the graven face, now smiling, now troubled.

Without warning the silence will be riven by the great shout of Musta's bell—like the voice of some titanic muezzin, calling from the minaret of heaven. The voices of all the bells will call, then, to each other. Some deep, manly baritones. Some high-pitched, boyish trebles. Some sweet and womanly, others cracked and querulous like the shrill chatter of crones.

The darkness will seem to stir ominously. The votive flame will flicker madly and die almost away. The protecting ox-horns above dim windows will seem to be shaken by an unseen hand. At last the bells will be silent, but there is no more stillness. All about us, from within every squat dwelling, there comes a murmuring—eerie, guttural, rising and falling in unfamiliar cadence—the voices of the peasants praying.

[776] It is "The Hour of the Departed," when every uneasy soul, every wandering sprite and *hares* is free to be abroad; when every devout peasant stirs restlessly at the sound of the bells, wakes and prays that the Restless Ones may be granted peace and that the Evil Ones be kept at bay.

The Old Things are awake. In every patch of darkness

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they are lurking—Baal, Mithra, Astarte, and all their kind. 788
The very stones beneath us seem to move and groan at the 178
memory of ancient power.

We are brave sceptics in the daylight and in the lamplit city. We shall not stand up here in this, Their Hour, and scoff at the Old Things.

[pp 141-150 not processed]